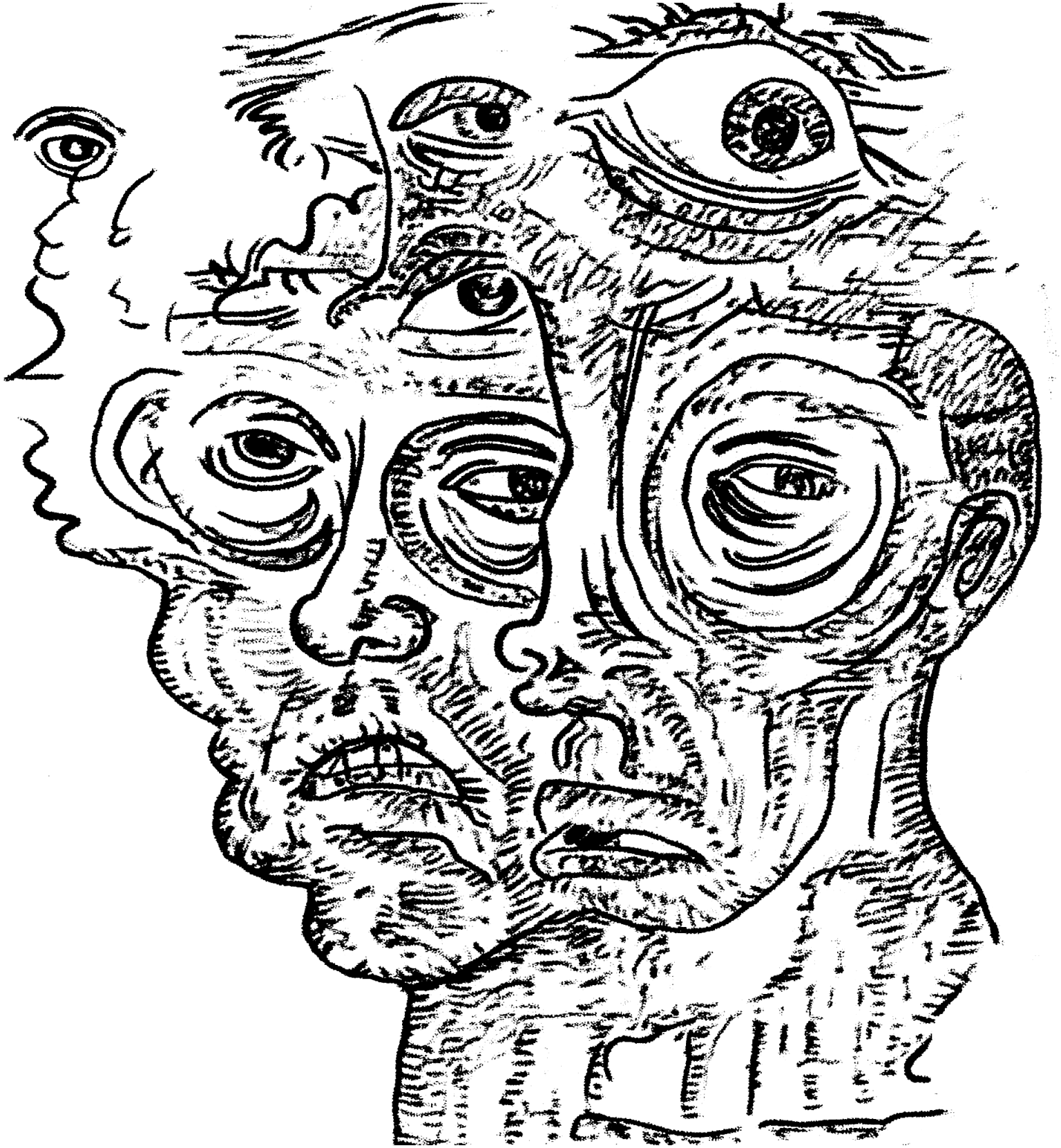

THE EDEN ROOM

-.. . .- -.. -- .- -. *william pauley III*

For my mother, who finally escaped The Tower.

Written under duress

during the dog days of summer.

Lexington, KY

2023

THE EDEN ROOM

by William Pauley III

My horns were throbbing.

Horns.

Would you listen to me?

Now I'm even calling them that.

They sprouted from my forehead something like a decade ago — *tumors*, one on each side. At first they were internal, but as they grew, my skull could no longer accommodate them, so they just burst right through the bone. They were short, maybe three inches long, and each sported branches, sort of like little trees growing outside my head. That's why the other residents took to calling them horns or antlers. They didn't think I could hear them when they'd say it, but I'd hear them. I'm full of tumors, not rocks.

Some call me a devil, without even knowing me. For all they knew, I was the nicest, most caring and compassionate person in all the world. I wasn't, but for the sake of my argument, I'm going with it. I could have been Jesus Christ himself — reborn! But they would've never

known, because they judge me. Not one could get past the grotesqueries of my face. Like theirs were any better…

I paid them no mind. They didn't deserve my attention. I'd never been one for other people anyway. I often fantasized that I was alone on earth. I suppose that's why I hardly left my apartment, because I was the only person living there, and everything within reach had been customized to my particular tastes — *perfection*. In all the world, the only things that were any good were right there between those walls. In all the world, nothing else mattered.

I took some ibuprofen to help ease the pain, but it had little to no effect, so instead I put on a record and collapsed onto the recliner, letting the sounds of a whirring guitar wash over me. The drums kicked in and suddenly I was floating inside the song, as if I was on a raft in some calm river, drifting downstream. In as many times as I'd heard the song, it felt different in that moment — completely new — as I was hearing all sorts of odd things I'd never heard before, lyrics, specifically, and peculiar instrument fills that I would've sworn weren't part of the original recording had it not been playing from the same record I'd owned for over half of my long life. Had I never actually listened to this song? Or were these throbbing tumors activating some deeper part of my brain, causing me to become a receptor to things that once flew by my radar, undetected?

Whatever the answer was, I didn't like it one bit. Being annoyed and in pain, I pushed the needle off the record with some violence, without even lifting it from the grooves, scarring the vinyl permanently. I didn't care. I wouldn't be listening to it ever again. It was nothing like I remembered. I had no use for it.

On my way back to the recliner, my tumors throbbed once again and the pain was so great it took me down to my knees. That's when I saw the most peculiar little thing I'd ever seen before: a bright blue insect with wings as long as any of my fingers. It was just crawling there on the floor, scavenging, paying me no mind. It was so peculiar that I immediately pushed myself to my feet and fetched my old 35mm film camera to snap a few photos of it, on the off chance that I'd come across some rare or undiscovered species. Perhaps some scientist somewhere would even name the species after me. It wasn't often that I

thought of leaving some kind of legacy, as I had no wife or children of my own, however that particular legacy was quite appealing to me. I respected insects. In a way, I identified with them: set in my ritualistic ways, stuck in a cycle, with no regard for anything outside of my own needs. I would've been honored to lend my name to one of them.

After a few quick snapshots, the bug sort of vibrated a moment, then fluttered its wings and flew away. I started to follow it, but before I could push myself to my feet, the throbbing of the tumors came roaring back and somehow it took the breath right out of me.

I collapsed against the floor, gasping.

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I awakened several hours later to a knock on the front door.

When I opened my eyes, my little bug friend was crawling on my face, treading so lightly I couldn't even feel it until I was fully awake. I was excited to see it was still in my apartment, but foolishly I swatted it away before I realized what it was. Perhaps startled, that curious creature's wings flapped itself straight into oblivion.

I lifted myself off the floor. I still felt weak, but the pain was gone now.

I sat on the recliner to catch my breath a moment and that was when I first noticed the debris floating in the air — dandelion seeds, hundreds of them, all detached and freefalling from some unknown space above me, as if God itself blew them into existence. Those soft, little white puffs swayed lightly in the air, drifting slowly to the floor, like snowflakes or cooling bits of ash after a volcanic eruption. Something haunted me about their presence. They shouldn't have been there. They had no business being in my Eighth Block apartment, with every one of its windows and doors fastened shut. For a moment I considered it to be only a hallucination or eye floaters… or the little sparks that would appear in times where I was feeling light-headed and weak. Yes, I suppose that's all this is, I thought,

for I am very weak. Then I held out my open palm and a few of them collected there.

A second round of fierce rapping at the front door startled me out of my confusion. I immediately leapt to my feet and answered the door as quickly as my legs would allow.

There was a man standing on the other side of the door, perhaps six feet tall had he not been slouching. His skin was covered in black soot and his clothes were tattered, as if he'd just survived an explosion. He held a lit cigarette in one hand and a small spiral notepad in the other. He glimpsed at one of the pages, then said aloud, "I'm looking for Waylon Peter Hurst."

His voice was deep and throaty, like rocks in a blender – not at all pleasing to the ear. He even winced as he spoke, as if the act of speaking aloud brought him a tremendous amount of physical pain. The camera was still hanging by a strap from my neck. I lifted it and snapped a quick photo of him just in case it would have to be used as evidence in my murder trial.

"Yes, I'm Waylon Hurst," I said, hunkering behind the door, keeping as much of it between us as possible. "Now, what's this all about? It's very late, you know. It better be important…"

The man laughed and took a drag from his cigarette, but never exhaled the smoke, as if he was swallowing it instead of breathing it.

"Waylon Peter Hurst, this is the most important night of your life," the man croaked, then took another hit from his cigarette. "My name is Tom Stripper. I'm your dispatcher. I'm gonna have to ask you to come with me."

"You're my what? My dispatcher?" I asked, shortening the gap between us by pushing on the door. He wedged his foot into it, preventing me from closing it completely. "Are you some kind of government official then? Show me your credentials."

He waved me off.

"No, it's nothing like that," he said, then immediately fell silent. He scratched the three-day stubble on his face, as if he wasn't sure

what to say next. “Look, there’s no easy way to say this, bub. Your time here is done. I’m here to transport you to the next place.”

“The next place? Do you mean to say that I’m… I’m…” I couldn’t get myself to say it. Instead, I ran my fingers along the branches of my exposed tumors.

“Sorry, kid,” the man said, despite that I was easily twice his age. “Them’s the breaks.”

The weight of the camera around my neck suddenly felt tremendously heavy. It reminded me of that strange little blue bug I saw just before I collapsed on the floor. A hallucination. Is that all this is? The dandelion spores swirling in the air around me seemed to confirm my theory was true.

“This isn’t real,” I said. “You aren’t real. Now would you kindly remove your foot from my door so I can get some much-needed sleep?”

“Look, kid… you’re not the only dead guy I have to move tonight,” the man said, sounding calloused and cruel. “Plus, you know, you’re not gonna be one of the easy ones either. Just look at this chart.” He flipped to another page within his tiny notebook and showed it to me. It was a hand-drawn chart filled with mostly indecipherable information.

“What does all of that mean?” I asked, giving up on reading it pretty quickly.

“It means you were an asshole,” he said, swallowing another round of hot smoke. “Pardon my French.”

“Excuse me?” I said, not really knowing what else I could say.

“All I’m saying is that you didn’t make it easy on us. Getting you to where you’re going will take half the night. There’s traps out the ass out here,” he continued, looking around the floor in the communal hallway. “To be honest, I’m not totally sure where you’re even headed just yet. The way you lived your life, you’re right there on the border between one place and the other. Right now, I’m just focusing on getting you into your hole. While you’re in there, I’ll do some

more digging and find out exactly where you're supposed to be. So come on, time's a'wastin'."

"My hole?" I asked. "I don't like the sound of that one bit."

"I'm not gonna stand here and explain every little detail to you. Let me show you. Come on."

"And if I say no?" I asked.

"Then you have to find your way there yourself," he said, shaking his head. "And spoiler warning, if you choose that route, you definitely… 100%… absolutely… will not find it. You'll just drift here until the hounds find you and rip you to shreds."

"Hounds? As in dogs?"

"Hellhounds," he said, lighting another cigarette with the one that came before it. "And you can bet your ass they'll find you quick too. Rarely takes longer than a day or so."

I looked him over once more. He hardly appeared to be some kind of angel or messenger of god. It had me wondering where I was meant to go. Out of fear, I didn't ask about my chances of being redeemed. I felt I already knew the unfortunate answer and didn't need confirmation of my imminent doom.

"You comin' or not? Last time I'm askin'," he said. He removed his foot from the doorway and began walking down the communal hallway.

After a moment of hesitation, I followed closely behind.

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"You do everything I do. You got that?" Tom barked. "Whenever I lift my foot, you put your foot exactly where I had mine, understand? This hallway is full of traps. One false move and BBZZZRRRRR." He made an odd buzzing sound with his mouth. I wasn't sure what it meant, but it sounded horrible. "Soul grinders, that's what they are. Trust me, you don't want to be caught in one."

I studied my surroundings, taking in every last detail. The hallway looked the same as it ever had before — busted lighting, heaps of salt, stained carpeting — not a trace of a soul grinder anywhere.

“I’ve walked this hallway many times in my life,” I said, dismissively. “I know it well. In fact, I know this building so well that I can tell you’re heading towards the elevator. Now, I’m no ‘dispatcher,’ but I can tell you right now that if you’re planning on taking me to where I’m going via the elevator, then you’re out of luck. The elevator’s busted. We’ll have to take the stairs.” As soon as I said it, I lost my footing and nearly fell to the floor, but thankfully Tom pulled me back on my feet before things got ugly.

“Christ, kid! You nearly fell into a soul grinder!” Tom yelled, scolding me as if I were his child. “We’re not even ten feet from your apartment and already you’re fucking up! At this rate, you’ll never get to where you’re going.”

“Where am I going?” I asked, lifting the camera to take a picture of the soul grinding trap I nearly just fell into. It still appeared to be nothing at all but a layer of filthy, trampled carpet, but I took the photo anyway. “I mean, I know you don’t know exactly where I’m going just yet, but what are the options? Heaven? Hell? Is there a third, less extreme destination — purgatory, perhaps?”

“Nah, that’s all fantasy bullshit,” Tom mumbled. He still had a grip on the collar of my shirt. “Supposing you don’t fall into one of the grinders here, you have two options: The Eden Room and The Other Place. One is good, the other is bad. Simple as that.”

“Bad in what way?” I asked.

Tom let loose of my shirt and waved his hands before me. “Nah, kid. That stuff’s all above my paygrade. All I know is that they make use of every soul I bring them. How? I’m not sure. But The Other Place isn’t the place you want to be, I’ll tell you that right now. Just hearing the sounds when you’re outside it — the constant screaming, the torture… it’s a terrible place. Hell, you’d be better off in a soul grinder.”

“Do you think that’s where I’m headed, to The Other Place?” I finally asked. I couldn’t help myself.

Tom just looked away and said, “Come on, kid. Like I said, I have a lot to do tonight. Wherever you’re going, you’ll be there soon enough.”

Tom began walking in the direction of the elevators.

“Aren’t you listening? I told you, the elevator’s busted. We have to take the stairs,” I said, pulling back on his arm, but he shrugged me off.

“Shut up, kid. Just follow me. You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

His words went right through me. I stomped my feet like a child and refused to take another step.

“Now see here! I am twice your elder!” I shouted at him. He stopped and leaned against the wall, sighing as if annoyed. He was paying more attention to his cigarette than he was to me. “Just because you have some connection to another realm of existence doesn’t give you the right to dismiss everything I say as hogwash! Now, I happen to have it on very good authority that the elevator is broken, and considering how long it takes to maneuver through these so-called ‘traps,’ we’re only wasting our time fooling around with it. So, please, will you stop being so goddamn stubborn and just listen for once!”

Tom didn’t respond. He just kept puffing on his cigarette.

“Well?” I asked, hoping to finally elicit a response.

“Are you finished yappin’?” he asked, quite rudely.

“For now. Yes,” I said.

He nodded, then pushed himself off the wall, still walking in the direction of the elevator. I couldn’t remember a time when I was more offended by the actions of an individual. The blatant disrespect!

“And you say that I’m an asshole!” I shouted, still standing in place.

“Hey, kid, what did I say about following my footsteps? You’re gonna fuck around and slip again… and you can bet your ass I won’t be saving you this time ‘round.”

“The stairway is behind me. That’s where I’m headed. Feel free to follow,” I said, then turned and started walking.

Tom watched in silence for a few seconds, unmoving, then dug into his pocket to remove his notepad. Surprisingly, he began to bark orders at me from his end of the hallway. “Turn right… forward two paces, then left.” He continued to shout directions at me until I’d made it all the way to the opening of the stairwell.

“Not coming with?” I shouted back at him, but before he could respond, an intense wave of nausea ran through me. It came out of nowhere and hit me like a kick to the back. I hunkered over and waited for it to pass, but the longer I stood there the worse I felt. I suspected it had something to do with my tumors again, but curiously, they weren’t aching in the slightest anymore.

“Well, don’t just stand there and take it, kid. Move forward about four steps,” Tom barked. He was laughing hysterically now, which sent him into a full two-minute coughing fit. By the time he was finally able to catch his breath, I’d already returned to his end of the hallway, following the same safe path I used minutes earlier. It took a moment for the nausea to fade, but Tom was right, I was feeling better with every step. The feeling was soon replaced by a strange numbing sensation that had my entire body tingling.

“I must know, what’s so funny about a man falling ill in front of you?” I asked, hoping to at least embarrass him. He just smiled.

“You humans are so goddamn stubborn. It’s entertaining seeing that look on your smug little faces whenever you realize you’re wrong, that’s all,” Tom said. “You can only see the humor in it from my side of the hallway, I guess. Trust me though, it’s a gas.”

“So, you’re not human, I take it?”

“That surprises you?” he asked.

“Well, you look human to me.”

“I’m not.”

“Right, but you certainly look the part.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I’m not.”

I nodded, getting the feeling he had no intention of ever elaborating for me. I decided just to accept his answer and move on.

The tingling sensation in my body seemed to be getting more intense, especially in the fingers and toes, as if I was fighting off some acute bout of paresthesia.

“What just happened to me, over by the stairwell? My body… something’s wrong,” I said. “Should I be concerned about what’s coming next?”

Tom once again held up his little notepad. “It’s all in here, bub. That stairwell became useless the day you refused to let your brother-in-law borrow your car so he could go to the beach. He was really looking forward to that trip, and you denied him that pleasure.”

“You can’t be serious,” I said, completely baffled at how Tom would’ve even known about that. “That happened somewhere around… 1988! Surely, you’re not serious!”

“You didn’t even use it that entire weekend. It just sat there. You never even left your apartment.”

“It was my car and my decision! I had every right to deny him!” I yelled. “So wait, are you saying that chart that you’re reading, it tells you where we can and can’t walk, and it’s all based on the decisions I’ve made in my life?”

“I didn’t say that, but yeah, that’s the gist of it,” he said. “And you sure as shit haven’t made it easy on yourself. Lots of selfish decisions, and even some odd ones that I can’t wrap my head around. Like this one here…” He pointed at his notepad. “You stuck a slice of American cheese beneath your little brother’s mattress and left it

there for six months before telling him where the smell was coming from. Seriously, what the fuck is that?”

I rolled my eyes. “I was eleven. How far back does that thing go?”

“All the way back,” he said. “Everything you’ve ever done has manifested itself here in this liminal space, between the between. That cheese incident is what formed the soul grinder you nearly fell into earlier. It’s the little things that’ll end up killing you for good, bub. Keep that in mind if you’re lucky enough to have another go at this human thing.”

“Our souls can be reincarnated?” I asked, at last feeling a small sliver of hope.

“I don’t know, kid. They do lots of weird stuff here. Like I said, it’s above my paygrade. I’m just a dispatcher. I take you from one zone to another. Now stop asking questions.”

I took one last look down that long, dark hallway and snapped a photo, for posterity's sake. The further we went along on our journey, the more I felt the need to document every last strange detail. Even if the dangers there weren’t detectable to the human eye, I still had hope the camera’s eye could see everything. Perhaps at some point, long after I’m gone, someone would find the camera, develop the film, and know all the secrets of the afterlife — at least the ones found here in this liminal space, as Tom had put it, between the between.

Ha! Here I am thinking of leaving a legacy again! Really, what’s come over me…

Tom looked at me, shook his head and lit another cigarette.

“Those things are bad for you, you know,” I said. If they were bad for humans, they had to be bad for whatever he was too, right?

“Shut up, kid,” he said. “Get in the elevator. This next step is important.”

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Much to my surprise – and annoyance, if I was being totally honest – the elevator was indeed running. Tom was right, though I certainly didn't say it aloud. To my credit though, the elevator we stepped inside clearly was not the same out-of-commission elevator stuck inside the walls of the Eighth Block Tower, no way, for the ride was much too long. We sped past each and every floor of the tower, and then another… and another… until thirty or more floors whizzed by us. At that point, I had to ask, "Is this thing taking us straight to Hell?" It seemed like a reasonable question to ask, as we had surely descended deep inside the Earth's crust by that point.

"I told you that stuff isn't real," Tom barked. He was studying the pages of his notepad, flipping through it with great urgency. "Besides, didn't I say not to ask any more questions? I have to concentrate."

I started to ask him what he was doing, but seeing as how it would only serve to annoy him, I decided against it. Instead, I waited patiently for his next instruction.

A few minutes later, he glanced down at his wristwatch and mumbled something under his breath. It sounded as if he was counting, but I couldn't hear him clearly enough to say for sure. Without warning, he jammed his fingers against the emergency stop button on the elevator panel and took a step back. The elevator came to an abrupt halt, dinged loudly, and a few seconds later the door slid open.

Immediately, a gush of bright green neon liquid pushed into the elevator.

"Goddamn it!" Tom shouted, hammering down repeatedly against one of the panel buttons. "Don't breathe that stuff in, kid! It's tower neon! The fumes are liable to knock you out, and I am not about to carry your dead ass the rest of the way!"

I nodded and held my breath as I watched the doors of the elevator close before me. Even though they were only open for a few seconds at most, there was enough of that strange green liquid trapped inside with us that we were waist deep within it. If Tom's reflexes were any slower, we surely would've drowned.

The elevator was descending once again. I snapped a quick photo, then pinched my eyelids shut. The fumes were so intense I could hardly see a thing. What was this stuff? It smelled like a mix of gasoline and black mold.

“Just a few more seconds and I’ll stop to drain this mess,” he said, somehow unaffected by the fumes. “Hold tight.”

After about a half a minute or so, he once again stopped the elevator, and as soon as the door opened all the toxic liquid seeped out onto the floor just outside it.

I gasped, finally taking in a lungful of air.

“No, no, no!” Tom yelled, cupping his hands over my mouth. “It’s not safe yet! Get those clothes off!”

I just looked at him, as if I hadn’t understood his command.

“Now!” he reiterated. “This isn’t a time to be shy. You don’t have anything that I haven’t got.” He looked up at the antlers sprouted from my forehead and reassessed. “Well, for the most part. How’d you get your horns, anyway?”

“They aren’t horns,” I said, stripping the wet clothes from my body and tossing them outside the elevator. They hit the floor with a sickening splat. “I’m a very sick man, Mr. Stripper. Isn’t that in your notes there?”

He shook his head. “No, it isn’t. That kind of stuff isn’t taken into consideration.”

“Well, perhaps it should be. Most of my life’s decisions were influenced by my many illnesses. To not consider that is a major oversight.”

Tom nodded. “Yeah, maybe so, but I don’t make the decisions here. That’s—”

“Above your paygrade, yeah yeah. I get it,” I interrupted.

“Right,” he said, then, like clockwork, he lit up yet another cigarette.

It felt strange being so exposed. I hadn't been naked in front of anyone for, hell, forty years or more! And never once in front of another man – other than a doctor, of course. I tried to think of Tom as just another one of my doctors, but it didn't really help to relieve any awkwardness. Thankfully Tom didn't seem affected by my nakedness in the slightest. That helped to calm me a bit.

I looked ahead, realizing just then I hadn't examined the floor before us. It was dark, much too dark to see the details in anything, however every few seconds or so one of the fixtures on the right-side wall would flash this intense white light, allowing us brief glimpses of the hallway. It looked identical to The Cliff, the floor I lived on, the place where all this madness first started.

"We haven't gone anywhere at all," I said, annoyed at our lack of progress. "Are we lost? Have you never done this before?"

"You and your never-ending questions… for God's sake, kid. Trust me!" Tom said, sounding even more annoyed than I was. "That place out there isn't what you think it is. It's a mirror. A copy. It's designed to trap your spirit. To confuse you. You go in there and you'll be stalking those hallways forever. It's a cycle of confusion. There's no way out."

I sighed. It was all so overwhelming. I couldn't wait for it to all be over.

"And yes, smart ass, I've done this many times before," Tom said, stepping closer to me as he said it. "But what you're failing to understand is that things are different every time I do this. I'm given all the information I need to navigate each spirit through to the next place, but it's like a puzzle. I have to work it out. It isn't easy, either. Lots of factors are involved. Sometimes I make mistakes. We all do. It's just part of the—"

His words were interrupted by a violent snarl. Immediately, his eyes lit up and the cigarette fell from his lips. Without hesitation, he hammered down on one of the buttons on the elevator panel repeatedly.

“Goddamn it, kid! Don’t you have any sense? Instincts? Somethin’?” he yelled, but I wasn’t sure what he meant by it. “Get back behind me, you’re standing in plain sight!”

The door finally started to close. As it moved, the snarling seemed to get louder. Dogs. It sounded like a pack of wild dogs charging. “Are those… the hellhounds?” I whispered, although it didn’t come out as quietly as I was hoping.

“Now you’re usin’ you’re noggin’,” Tom said, then shouted, “Now move, damn you!”

I stepped over to the side to hunker down behind Tom, but I was a fraction of a second too late. Just before the steel door of the elevator slid fully shut, one of the hellhounds pushed in through the opening and gnashed wildly at the air, long strips of slimy saliva taking flight with every chomp of its jaws. One of the bites caught me in the side and immediately I fell to the floor in submission. I suppose the thing would’ve sat there devouring me the rest of the night, had it not been for Tom’s quick hand. I wasn’t sure what he did, as I was far too consumed with the images of my life flashing before my eyes, but whatever it was, it killed the dog instantly. Its limp body fell to the floor just as the elevator began descending again.

“Christ, kid. I’m sorry. That one was on me,” he said, removing a dirty bandana from his jacket pocket and handing it over to me. “Put this on the wound. Apply pressure. Don’t worry, you won’t be in pain much longer. We’re almost to your hole.”

I said nothing at all, but I could tell Tom was worried because his mind was too occupied to smoke anymore. He kept a close eye on his wristwatch as the elevator continued to plunge through the earth. If I hadn't already been told the end was near, I would’ve assumed as much in that moment. Everything seemed to have a weight to it now, a darkness. Even the light. And my body was shivering, but that could’ve just been because I had no clothes to insulate whatever warmth I had left inside me.

I closed my eyes.

A few seconds later, the elevator once again came to a screeching halt. The bell dinged and the door slid open, revealing yet another long hallway, draped in near total darkness.

I just shook my head and kept my position there on the floor of the elevator. “I’m not going out there,” I said. “It’s just the same as before.”

Tom dug his hand under my arm and lifted me to my feet. I tried to fight him on it, but I was far too weak. “It’s not the same. Look, see for yourself.”

He removed a flashlight from the inside of his jacket and used it to light the world outside the elevator. Much to my surprise, it wasn’t a hallway at all, but instead a tunnel, made of wet brick and concrete. It was much too long to see just how far down it went and the light from his flashlight was too weak to penetrate the darkness at the end of the tunnel.

“It’s a bit of a walk, but we’ll be safe in here,” he said, helping me out of the elevator.

“I can do it,” I said, pushing him away. I was still in a great amount of pain, but it was radiating entirely within my torso. My legs were more than capable of walking without assistance. “Where are we now?”

“I told you, I’m taking you to your hole,” he said, shuffling through his notepad once again.

“You keep saying it as if I’m supposed to know what it means!” I said, snapping back at him. Perhaps it was due to the pain, but my mood was no doubt souring by the minute. “Do you mean a hole in the ground? Like… a grave?”

“Not exactly,” he said, then dug into his pockets for another cigarette. “It’s more like a field… a field of holes. Each one has a little label on it with the name of the dead person it belongs to.”

“That’s a graveyard,” I said, not meaning to sound pompous, just stating a fact.

“It’s not a graveyard,” he said, lighting his cigarette.

“What you just described is a graveyard,” I repeated. “How is that not a graveyard?”

Tom sucked in a lungful of smoke and held it there a few seconds, contemplating in silence. “Shit. I suppose it is sort of a graveyard, at least by that description. It’s not what you have in your head though, not exactly. You’ll see what I mean once we get there. This place is different. It’s full of all the people in your life who passed on before you.”

All at once, I could no longer feel the pain in my side. Everything changed the moment he said those words to me.

“Dottie,” I muttered under my breath, then before Tom could even register what it was I’d said, I took off running.

“Waylon! Hey! Damn!” Tom yelled. I imagine he ran after me, but I didn’t even bother to look back once I got going. I kept running until I made it to the end of the tunnel. The space it opened into felt wide, wider than the tunnel itself, but it was too dark to see more than a few feet ahead of me. It was exactly as Tom had described, just a vast field full of open holes. I frantically examined each of the stone labels, looking for the one with Dottie’s name on it.

A few seconds later, the light from Tom’s flashlight danced across the field, getting brighter the closer he got to me.

“Kid! What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Tom yelled, greatly winded. His black lungs were struggling to provide his body with the amount of oxygen needed to remain conscious.

“My wife,” I said, not allowing him to distract me from my search. “I’m looking for my wife, Dottie. She’s here. She arrived more than forty years ago. I need to see her.”

I took off running to examine the next row of holes.

“Goddamn it, kid… you’re wastin’ your time!” he yelled, but his words only made me angry. I ignored him and continued searching. “How many people did you know anyway? Don’t get me wrong, I’m sure you had

friends, but this place is massive. I guess I took you for sort of the loner type. I wasn't expecting this."

I finally stopped so I could turn and look at him.

"I have to ask you something," I said, my entire body was humming with adrenaline. "Just what information do you have in that little notebook of yours, huh? Cause nothing in there seems to be significant in any way whatsoever! If you have all the details of my life written down in there, then you should damn well know about Dottie. She was my everything. And she was taken from me much too soon. I shut down after she died. Losing someone like that, someone you love more than life itself, it has a way of gnawing at your conscience. All these people surrounding us now, after the funeral, they became only a memory to me. Some of that was my doing, some of it was theirs. Her death changed something deep within me. I was no longer the man they once knew. I became unrecognizable to them… hell, I was unrecognizable even to myself. It took me many years to find who I was after her passing, and who I was turned out to be a broken man who was better off alone. Then I got sick. Then I got sick again. But of all the scars and sickness in my life, the wounds around my heart were always the greatest. Losing Dottie, along with all my many illnesses, it's all played a huge role in every decision I've ever made, right down to the seemingly insignificant ones you seem to be judging me for now."

"I told you, it ain't me, kid, it's—" he started to say, but I cut him off before he could finish the thought.

"I don't care who it is! The system is flawed! How can you judge anyone without context? It's impossible! Shame on you, Tom Stripper! Shame on everyone you work for!"

He refused to make eye contact with me after that. Instead, he just nodded his head, as if he was urging for me to look at something. I turned and saw the beam of his flashlight illuminating a section of the ground a few feet in front of us, where a stone label was set. I stepped closer to get a better look at the name written upon it. Sure enough, it was my Dottie's.

I threw myself down upon the grass and dug my arms deep into the hole in the ground, just beyond the label. At first, I felt nothing but

dirt, however after pushing a little farther into it, something smooth and cold brushed against my fingers. Skin. It was the unmistakable soft, fair skin of my beautiful wife, Dottie.

Unfortunately, that's all it was – just skin. Nothing more.

Once I felt it, I gave it a pull and removed it entirely from the hole. There was hardly any weight to it, almost like holding a silk blanket. It felt delicate and cool as it slid across my own skin. I sifted through each fold, looking for her face. In all those years, I'd only ever dreamed of seeing her face again – then there it was, in my hands, one last time. Though she hardly looked the way I remembered, I immediately broke down once I saw her. I buried my face in the dirt and sobbed harder than I'd ever had before. Everything I'd kept down deep inside, for forty years and longer, I let it all out, right there in the dirt.

Dandelion spores continued to swirl in the air around me, falling and collecting on my naked shoulders, my hair, and the backside of my arms.

To Tom's credit, he let me have that moment with her, uninterrupted. He even gave me some space, finding a small patch of grass for himself, about 20 yards away, a place where he could sit down and smoke his many cigarettes. Once I was finally ready, I returned Dottie to her bed of dust, then caught up with him.

"Where's the rest of her, Tom?" I asked. I wanted to know the answer to that question the moment I saw her again, but I couldn't form the words until now.

He shook his head and took a draw from his cigarette. "The Eden Room. At least that's where she was led."

"You took her there?" I asked, perking up a bit.

"Not me. Someone else. Another dispatcher."

"But she's there, for sure? How do you know?" I asked.

"She was taken there, yes. I just know," he said, and didn't elaborate any further.

I was crying again. “That’s what I was hoping you’d say,” I said, the words barely coming out. “And now I know, without a doubt, that all of this… absolutely, positively… isn’t real.”

Tom nodded and pointed down into the hole that was carved into the ground directly in front of him. The name on the label was—

“Waylon Peter Hurst,” Tom said, his eyes filling with tears as he said it. “It’s time for you to leave that body.”

As he said my name aloud, I thought about his: Tom Stripper. All at once, it hit me, and when it did, I was overcome by a fit of laughter.

Tom stood up and stared at me in confusion, but instead of trying to make sense of it, he just continued sucking down smoke.

“Tom Stripper!” I shouted, then laughed once again. “*Stripper*, right? As in ‘you strip souls from bones’?”

He sighed. “Kid, can we get on with this?”

“This is a joke!” I shouted, still hysterical. “This is all so ridiculous! You really had me going! This is nothing! This is an illusion! None of this is real! I’m asleep on the floor of my Eighth Block apartment with a tiny little blue bug dancing upon my head!”

I lifted my camera and took another photo of Tom. He didn’t seem amused in the slightest. Instead of saying another word, he once again just pointed down into the hole at his feet.

“Fine, fine,” I said. “I’ll do it. If anything, this’ll be what wakes me up! How long do I have to stay in there for, anyway?”

“Oh, you’ll know, kid,” he said, with a short chuckle. “It’ll be long enough for me to figure out where your portal is, let’s say that. For some reason, I’m still having trouble finding it.”

“My portal?” I asked.

“For Christ’s sake, kid. Haven’t you heard anything I’ve said? I’m taking you to the next place. I’m still sorting out what portal I’m supposed to be looking for.”

“What do they look like? The portals, I mean?”

Tom laughed. “I honestly can’t say I’ve ever met another spirit with so many questions! Goddamn!” He shook his head, as if he wasn’t sure how to answer my question. “I suppose they’re sort of like… a doorway made of TV static. Bright and fuzzy. Hard to miss, when you’re in the same room as one, that is. The trick is in finding the right room.”

I nodded, pleased with the answer, then hunkered down on my knees and began to crawl inside my hole, but before I did, I asked one final question. “What would happen if you crawled down inside one of these things? Would it strip your soul, too?”

He squinted his eyes and pondered the answer for a moment. “It’s a great question, kid. Really, it is,” he said, finally. “But I don’t have the answer. All I can say is that I have a certain talent for transporting spirits from one realm of existence to another, and that’s what I’m going to continue to do for the foreseeable future. I think you’d be surprised at just how little I understand about this whole process. I’m like a cog in some machine. I do my part to make the whole thing work, but if you ask me to build another one, I wouldn’t know where to start. The way I see it, dispatchers alone are responsible for the state of the world — your old world, that is. The place you came from. You see, now this may or may not be true, but it’s what I choose to believe… I believe humans are inhabited by different spirits at different times of their lives. Maybe it’s just an attempt to explain why people mature and ultimately become different versions of themselves throughout their lives, but to me, it truly feels as if the body is simply a vessel for other spirits, many spirits. I think the spirit that was inside you when Dottie died left right along with her. I think they're still together somewhere. The Eden Room, maybe. I don’t know. Now this may be hard to hear, but I don’t think the one inside your body now belongs with them. Some spirits are jaded. They don’t grow. And see, it’s my job to weed all those nasty ones out. Take ‘em out of rotation. It’s not about good and evil, necessarily, it's about growing and regressing. Dispatchers are given information, and that information determines where a spirit goes next. It’s an important role, if I say so myself. So, to answer your question, I’ll never know what would happen if I stepped down

into one of these holes, because I never would. I'm much too busy pulling up all the bad weeds."

"That's quite the answer, Mr. Stripper," I said. "Only one problem with your theory, that I can see."

"And what's that?" he asked, swallowing another round of hot smoke.

"You don't make the decisions around here. And the ones making the decisions are making bad calls. I think the machine may be in dire need of a new set of cogs and screws, what do you think?"

Tom sighed. "What do I think, huh? Well, I think neither one of us understands enough about our place in any of this to make much of a difference no-how. So, with that said, I'll do what I do, and you do what you do."

"And what is it that I do?" I asked, honestly not sure of the answer.

"You crawl inside that damn hole."

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Sometime later, I emerged from the hole, feeling as if nothing at all had happened. I wasn't sure how long I was in there. It felt like days, but it couldn't have been more than a couple hours. It was dark and there was only enough room in there to sit, so I couldn't even get comfortable. I spent the time reminiscing on the better parts of my life, the parts before Dottie… well, you know. That part was nice. It was rare that I allowed myself into those sacred spaces of my psyche. It could be a bit overwhelming at times, but after a good cry, I'm filled with mostly just good feelings. It was necessary every now and then.

It did get me thinking, though: If Tom's theory was right, would I even have these memories? Or would they have gone with the original spirit? Are our spirits connected to these thoughts? To our brains? If the brain is the body and the body dies, then what is the spirit? And what are we if we aren't our memories?

The answers seemed to present themselves the moment I stepped out of that hole, freshly stripped of my body — as a new spirit ready to take the first steps on my next journey. My memories indeed were there with me, but I still wasn't entirely convinced that any of it was actually happening. I was dying, no doubt — but instead of standing tall in that ethereal, ageless body, stalking a surreal landscape pocked with skin holes, I feared my true reality was that I was trapped within the slowly fading mind of a tumor-filled head, attached to a wilted, withering pre-corpse that was spread out on the dirty living room floor of a crumbling Eighth Block apartment, and that everything that came after my collapse was only the delusions of some pitiful, desperate fantasy.

Perhaps Tom was right, neither of us knew enough about anything, especially when it came to our existence. If he and all that surrounded me in that moment were only a delusion, then I accepted it, the same way I'd often choose to continue to dream, moments after waking.

Tom was sitting in the same spot I'd left him, only now he was preoccupied with what looked to be a bundle of sticks. I asked him what he was doing and he looked surprised to see me there.

"Christ, kid. You nearly gave me a heart attack," he said, clutching his chest. "I didn't think you'd be out so soon."

"Does the process usually take longer?" I asked.

"Depends. Like I said, it's all different every time," he said, then flicked the spent butt of his cigarette somewhere out in the field. "I've been hard at work! Figured out where you're headed and even had time to fashion these boots for you."

He held up two bundles of broken sticks, each held together by rope and thin twine.

"You say those are boots?"

"I'll explain in the elevator. Come on, kid. It's time."

– – – – X

“I see you brought your horns with you,” Tom said. I was confused at first, but after a quick examination, I found he was right. The tumors were still with me.

“But… how?” I asked. “I left my body back in the hole. Are these things attached to my spirit?”

“It appears so,” he said. “I figured as much. I’ve seen it before.”

“You have? What do they mean?”

He just shook his head. “Nah, it’s just more theories. Like I said, kid, I don’t know much about any of this stuff. I just see things and try my best to make sense of it.”

“I’d still like to know what you think, theory or truth,” I said.

He laughed. “Well, I guess I just assume it’s an indicator of your character.”

“You mean to say I’m a devil?”

“Devil? No, nothing like that. Devils are for cartoons.”

“What about the hellhounds? Aren’t they from Hell? It’s right there in the name.”

“The Devil, Hell… it’s all kid’s stuff,” he said, lighting another cigarette. “The hellhounds aren’t officially called hellhounds. If they’ve got a name, I don’t know it. I just call ‘em that cause that’s how I see ‘em.”

“And you’re not human?” I asked once again, just to be sure. The way he said things sure made it seem like he was.

“Why do you want to know about me? This is your story, your ending… I’m just a small part of it. Insignificant.”

“My ending?” I asked, then thought on it for a moment. “So, I won’t be coming back then?”

“Just enjoy the ride, pal. Stop thinking so much,” he said, bending over to pick up one of the stick bundles. “So, these boots… I’ve never done this before. I’m pretty impressed with myself, to be honest. Wasn’t sure I had it in me.”

“You’re saying ‘boots,’ right? As in shoes? Things I wear on my feet?” What he held in his hands looked to be the furthest thing from boots. It was an oblong bundle of sticks and each of the sticks were broken at both ends. It stood about a foot and a half off the ground and a loose rope was attached to the top of it.

“Use your imagination, kid. They’re boots,” he said. “They’re gonna help you get to where you’re going.”

He bent down and strapped a bundle to the bottom of each of his feet using the loose bit of rope at the top, then clomped around the elevator to prove his point.

“See, they’re boots,” he said. “Or maybe they’re stilts. They’re something. They go on your feet, that’s all you need to know.”

“Okay, I can see that now,” I said. “But why do I need them?”

“Because when we get to the roof, there will be rain puddles everywhere. As much as you may feel compelled to stomp about and play in them, you should do nothing of the sort. You see, they ain’t puddles, kid… more like traps… worse than traps, really. If you touch ‘em, they’ll take you somewhere dark. The worst of all the places you could possibly be. I can’t stress enough, don’t touch ‘em.”

I nodded, then smiled. I couldn’t help myself. “So, we’re going up to the roof, then?”

Tom immediately began waving his hands, as if trying to wipe all traces of my fantasy away before it got the best of me. “No, kid. I know what you’re thinking. Up equals Heaven and God and happiness forever… kid, it ain’t real! That’s not what’s about to happen.”

“Where am I headed then?”

He just sighed, then bent down to untie his weird boots. “I told you, enjoy the ride. You’ll be seeing for yourself soon enough.”

- - - - X

After a few minutes of riding, the elevator finally dinged and came to a halt on the uppermost floor of the Eighth Block Tower. When the door slid open, I was surprised to see it had taken us to the roof. Even when the elevator was working, it never went as far as the roof, only to The Cliff. The roof could only be accessed via the stairwell.

The roof was exactly as Tom had described it, full of large, seemingly deep rain puddles, as if it had just collected a nightful of rain. It was no longer raining, however, and the sun was just beginning to come up over the city. The sky was beaming with bursts of orange and gold and birds circled around in the sky directly above me, hunting for their next meal. I couldn't have asked for a more beautiful final moment.

"Alright, kid. Let's strap you in," Tom said, then leaned down to fasten the boots to my feet. "Did I ever tell you where these sticks came from?"

"You didn't get them in the skin field?" I asked.

"Skin field? Hey, I like that. I may use it," he said, pulling the rope a little too tight. "No, no. These sticks are provided to you based on random acts of kindness your spirit performed while it was existing in the living world. They can be helpful in avoiding traps, or in the event that your portal is in an inconvenient location and you need a ladder or a bridge to help get you there. The more you do for others in your life, the more sticks you're given, and therefore the greater the chances that you'll get to your portal. Now, you may or may not be surprised to hear that you weren't given an awful lot to go on, but I did what I could with what little I had to work with, and lucky for you, it's enough to get you to where you're going."

I sighed, thinking for a moment of where my sticks may have come from. It upset me to realize that I wasn't sure. I put so little kindness into the world that I couldn't even remember a single event that would have given me one.

“There you are, kid. You’re good to go,” Tom said, then stood up to light another cigarette. “All you have to do is walk straight across the roof — right here, directly in front of us — then stand up on that ledge… and jump.”

“Jump?!” I shouted. “You can’t be serious! You want me to jump off the roof of the Eighth Block Tower?”

“Your portal is there, kid. Right over the edge,” Tom said, looking away from me as he said it. “Trust me. It’s there.”

I nodded. “TV static, right?”

He took a hit from his cigarette, then ran his fingers through his greasy hair. “TV static, right.”

I stepped out onto the roof and was immediately hit by a wave of nausea, exactly as I had felt when I tried to walk down the stairwell hours earlier. There was an odd fragrance lingering in the air. Even though I was now standing outside, out upon that great weather-worn roof of the Eighth Block Tower, breathing in the crisp morning air of the city, somehow it still smelled as though I was inside — musty, stale.

I turned back in time to catch a final glimpse of Tom, just before the steel elevator door closed between us. He lifted his hand slightly and muttered, “So long, kid.”

Then he was gone.

I walked through each puddle with ease. The boots he’d made for me were just tall enough to make it through the deepest of the water there. Not even a drop made it onto my feet.

When I got to the edge of the building, I removed the boots so I could climb up onto it. Dandelion seeds continued to drift in the air around me, as far as the eye could see, collecting upon the rooftops of every surrounding building.

After a minute or so, I finally mustered enough courage to look down over the edge — with little hope, and slowly.

There was nothing to see.

Nothing at all.

I held up my camera, snapped a picture, then set it down on the ledge of the building.

My eyes felt bright in the morning sun. I closed them, letting the warmth wash over me.

I allowed myself one final look back at my life with Dottie.

Afterwards, I opened my eyes and looked down into the empty space below me — then jumped straight into it.

- - - - END - - - -

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In death,
you must walk
a path you
unknowingly
created while
you were
living.